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ABSTRACT

The paper examines problems in the utilization of the Resource Specialist Teacher (RST) mandated by California law to serve handicapped students. The study evaluated whether the RST certificate mandate effectively altered the implementation of the least restrictive environment policy for disabled students in a rural area of northeastern California. A literature review highlights the critical role of the RST in effective implementation of the least restrictive environment educational policy for these students. Thirty-eight individuals who completed the RST training were surveyed regarding their duties, student caseloads, and their attitudes concerning least restrictive environment policy. Analysis of survey results indicated that most RSTs spend the majority of their time in direct instruction with little time available for other functions, that caseload size often exceeded the maximum allowed by state law, and that RSTs have little control over school district least restrictive environment policies. It is concluded that the current approach is not working because RSTs are not spending their time in consultation and coordination functions. Recommendations include redefining the RST role to focus on consultation more than instruction, increased inservice of regular teachers regarding handicapped students, and use of RSTs as the IEP (Individualized Education Program) team coordinator at all schools. (DB)

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A THREE YEAR FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF RESOURCE SPECIALIST TEACHERS IN NORTHEASTERN CALIFORNIA Teacher Education's Impact on Least Restrictive Environment Policy

Under the California Master Plan for Special Education of 1974, the role of the Resource Specialist Teacher (RST) was created. In 1981, the California legislature mandated the training and certification of RSTs. The RST's functional role encompasses direct instruction, consultation, assessment, inservice for regular teachers, coordination of special education services, parent education, and vocational or prevocational education.

The California legislature has recently become concerned with the growth in the number of individuals identified as learning disabled, who are being placed in resource specialist programs. A statewide learning disabilities evaluation study, administered by the Office of the Legislative Analyst, is now being conducted to address three areas of concern: (1) resources directed toward identification and assessment, and away from instruction; (2) the possibility of "misidentification," based on improper test administration; and (3) the cost effectiveness of resource specialist programs (State of California 1987).

My follow-up study indicates that these problems are not the fault of the RST, but rather the implementation of special education policy at the local education agency level. In particular, the least restrictive environment (LRE) policy is not generally being implemented as intended by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) or the California Master Plan for Special Education.

RURAL FOCUS

California State University, Chico (CSU, Chico) serves a twelve county region in northeastern California. This region, nearly the size of the state of Ohio, is primarily rural, sparsely populated, and mountainous. From July 1984 through June 1987, CSU, Chico received federal funds from the Division of Personnel Preparation, Office of Special Education of the U.S. Department of Education to develop and implement the RST training program. The RST training program provided employed teachers with instruction over a two semester period, through ten one-unit modules, for six hours on Saturdays. The CSU, Chico Regional Instructional Television for Students (ITFS) System was used to deliver the RST training program to outlying areas up to 200 miles from campus. This delivery system enabled the project to involve teachers who, for reason of local district policy, distance, and geographic location, would have otherwise had no opportunity to complete state-mandated RST training requirements.

The rural character of northeastern California exacerbates the already difficult problem of providing adequate and effective education for all handicapped children. Research documents the unique problems of rural special education, which dramatically increases the cost per unit of education. The CSU, Chico service region experiences many of these same effects: high turnover rates among teachers, climatic conditions (mountainous terrain with inclement winter weather), professional isolation, and the resistance to change which frequently pervades rural settings (Helge 1981). A major economic factor to impact this rural area was an erosion of the tax base for

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education, a direct result of the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, which substantially reduced property taxes -- at that time a major source of funding for education in California.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research was to conduct a follow-up study, as part of a three year program evaluation, and to assess the current status of former RST project participants. The overall evaluation plan was used to determine if the RST training program was an effective method for alleviating the shortage of "qualified" resource specialist teachers in northeastern California. The evaluation results confirmed that the RST training program was an effective method for training rural RSTs.

The purpose of the follow-up study was to identify the number of former students who had received their clear RST certificate by June 1987, and to assess the impact of the RSTs' training on the education of students with exceptional needs in the least restrictive environment. Further, the follow-up study was used to examine key policy issues, such as caseload size, time spent on the various RST functions, and inclusion of state-mandated RST functions within job descriptions.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the follow-up study was to assess the impact of inservice education--in this case, intensive training focusing on RST functional roles--on students with exceptional needs in resource specialist programs who are required to receive their education in the least restrictive environment. Does the RST certificate mandate effectively alter the implementation of the least restrictive environment policy? This was the compelling question to be answered by the follow-up study. Information was collected and analyzed which substantiated that this is not the case in some rural schools in northeastern California.

THE PROBLEM

According to Haight (1984), the training of teacher consultants to work with regular classroom teachers is critical to the least restrictive environment component of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. When handicapped children are mainstreamed into regular classrooms, the major role for the teacher consultant, or the RST in California, should be indirect services, which are services not provided directly to the students, but from which they will benefit. Consultation, therefore, is a service necessary for the integration of handicapped children into regular education settings, or normalization (Haight 1984; Jenkins and Mayhall 1976). The integrated RST training program was developed to increase the RSTs' ability to assist regular classroom teachers in providing handicapped students with an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

The California Education Code clearly defines both direct and indirect services to be provided by RSTs. However, the responsibility of assigning these duties is left up to the local education agencies, i.e. the school or school district. The policy implications are significant. First of all, variance in job descriptions, or the lack of job descriptions, for RSTs creates such diversity that a standardized RST curriculum (based on the state mandates) does not meet the needs of teachers currently employed as RSTs, special educators with RST responsibilities, or regular classroom teachers training to be RSTs to meet local needs. Secondly, the broad variation in implementation of RST functions at the local level ignores the critical need

for the teacher consultant role which provides services that are meant to ensure an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

As part of the normalization process, the role of the resource specialist teacher as consultant and coordinator becomes paramount to instructional activities. Caseload size, therefore, becomes a critical issue. If the caseload is too large or entails primarily direct instruction, then the RST does not have sufficient time to devote to consultation with regular classroom teachers, or to provide needed inservice training.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Least Restrictive Environment: Impact of Teacher Education

"We are in a period of deep renegotiation of relations between 'special' and 'regular' education...A major principle operating in the changes is that of the 'least restrictive environment,' which in effect calls for the strengthening of regular school programs as a resource for exceptional students." (Foreword by Dr. Maynard Reynolds, Weisenstein and Pelz 1986, xi)

The central issue in the implementation of public policy for special education is the least restrictive environment (LRE). Of all the principles underlying P.L. 94-142 and the California Master Plan for Special Education, the least restrictive environment policy at the school site level is the most relevant to the resource specialist teacher program.

Prior to least restrictive environment policy, the "two-box model" was in effect, which exemplifies the bifurcation of educational services into regular and special education. The "two-box" model is not acceptable under the least restrictive environment policy. Least restrictive environment policy is best implemented using a continuum of services (Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin 1986; Weisenstein and Pelz 1986).

One aspect of the least restrictive environment policy is the need for a consultant role. Regular classroom teachers are not prepared to provide instructional adaptations for handicapped students. And special education teachers have traditionally been on the periphery, or outside, of the school organization. There is clearly a need for someone who can bridge the gap created by the bifurcation of regular and special education. The consultant teacher role and the resource specialist teacher evolved as outgrowths of public policy change regarding education of the handicapped.

"Within the relevant historical, legislative, empirical, and ethical contexts, collaboration among personnel with varied expertise becomes the sine qua non of providing successful services in more normalized environments for students with special needs" (Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin 1986, 40). The consultation model affects all aspects of the process to serve handicapped students. The consultation process at the school site level is essential to the establishment of cooperative efforts between regular classroom teachers and resource specialist teachers.

The relationship between regular and special educators as embodied in the teacher consulting model is critical because it "facilitate[s] student success in the least restrictive environment" (Haight 1984). Haight confirms the need for the consultant teacher role, stating that there is a "need for an individual whose role encompasses skilled, multifaceted diagnosis, multidisciplinary coordination, and synthesis of information into a plan of intervention." The trained RST is such an individual.

Miller and Sabatino (1978) evaluated the teacher consultant model as an approach to mainstreaming. The purpose of the Miller and Sabatino study was to investigate the effectiveness of the teacher consultant model by comparing it to the resource room model with mildly handicapped students.

Their results showed no significant differences in academic achievement between the two models; however, they felt the teacher consultant model was effective because academic gains were "on par" with the direct service approach provided by the resource room model. Further, in comparing student-teacher interactions between fall and spring, they found measures of teacher behavior improvement were more frequently observed in the teacher consultant model.

Singleton (1976) studied the role of the RST in increasing positive attitudes among regular teachers toward having learning disabled and emotionally disturbed students in their classroom. Observations were made of two teacher training methods: workshop, and direct assistance in the classroom. Her findings indicated that the direct assistance approach was the most effective, and created significant differences in teacher attitudes.

Given all the expectations of the resource specialist teacher, it is not surprising the California State Department of Education sponsored projects to define and delineate the RSTs' role (e.g., Mitchell 1976; Ballard-Campbell and Semmel 1982). Nonetheless, there remain no clear-cut policy guidelines to establish a reasonable caseload of students, much less a reasonable workload given the dynamic responsibilities required of the resource specialist teacher. Direct instruction of students continues to consume the largest percentage of the RSTs' time, thus reducing time and energy for consultation and coordination with regular classroom teachers and other staff (Ballard-Campbell and Semmel 1982).

The functional role of the resource specialist teacher, especially consultation, is essential to the implementation of special education policy. The existing problems are most likely related to the organizational structure of special education at the school site, or district level, rather than the actual RST functional role.

METHODOLOGY

The Population: The population selected for the follow-up study included all individuals who completed RST training modules from Fall, 1984 through Spring, 1987. This total population included thirty-eight individuals. Twenty-six are currently employed as resource specialist teachers.

The Instrument: The Follow-up Survey was designed after a review of the California Education Code and its requirements for RSTs. A content expert reviewed and critiqued the draft of the instrument. The Follow-up Survey was divided into three sections. The first (I) section was to be completed by all former RST candidates regardless of current employment status. Sections II and III were only to be completed by those who were currently employed as an RST or whose job required RST functions regardless of job title.

The Follow-up Survey focuses on the various duties required of RSTs as presented in the Education Code. Further, it includes questions related to the state-mandated cap on student caseloads for RSTs, as well as the RSTs' perspectives on the least restrictive environment for their handicapped students.

The Data Gathering Procedure: The follow-up study was implemented using a mail survey. The first survey was sent out with a cover letter, a self-addressed stamped envelope, and a response post card. The response post card was to be returned if a respondent preferred to complete the follow-up survey by telephone. Some respondents returned the post card with their survey stating that they could be called if there were further questions, however, no one specifically requested a telephone interview format.

A second letter to encourage responses was mailed to non-respondents exactly two weeks after the initial follow-up survey was mailed. At that

time, two individuals called to say that they had not received the first letter and survey; they were sent a complete set of survey materials. The second letter yielded eight more responses.

Ten non-respondents of the total 38 remained six weeks after the first mailing. A third letter was sent to elicit their cooperation, along with a second copy of the survey and another stamped, self-addressed envelope. This third mailing yielded six responses. The final four non-respondents were identified in the data, based on university records, by sex and whether employed as an RST.

Analysis: Descriptive statistics used for the follow-up study included means, standard deviations, number of respondents, and percentages when appropriate. Means and standard deviations were also calculated for the rankings of RST functions. Analysis of variance was conducted using the .05 level of significance to test whether the RSTs' caseload size impacts their attitude about removal of the caseload cap. The assumption was made that a larger caseload would create a negative attitude toward removal of the caseload cap.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Summary of Evaluation Baseline Demographics: Over the past three years, a total of 77 students enrolled in the RST training program, 31 in year one, 24 in year two, and 22 in year three. In summarizing the demographic data for all three years, RSTs in northeastern California are typically white females in their mid-thirties who are credentialed for elementary education. RSTs primarily work with learning handicapped children, serving an average of twenty pupils per week. RSTs are most often required to provide direct instruction for special education students, attend IEP meetings, and conduct assessments.

Summary of Follow-up Study Findings: Twenty-six of thirty-eight former RST candidates were employed as RSTs by summer 1987. Only seven had received their clear RST certificate, but eleven more were eligible. The majority of currently employed RSTs spend their time on direct instruction, with little time available for other RST functions. The caseload size was also a critical issue, because over twenty percent of the respondents had a caseload larger than the state-mandated ceiling of twenty-eight. Other RSTs were not counting students that they assessed (up to 40 for some) as part of their regular caseload, despite the law's requirement that these students be included as part of the caseload. From the Follow-up Survey findings, it was ascertained that RSTs have little control over least restrictive environment policy. This research confirms that conditions in some schools have not changed to accommodate the implementation of federal and state special education mandates, and particularly least restrictive environment policy. Further, despite changes in the law and the RST inservice training program, many regular classroom teachers remain recalcitrant in their attitudes and behavior toward mainstreamed students with exceptional needs.

In conclusion, the results underscore the need for a closer examination of the implementation of special education policy at the local level. In northeastern California, for example, the RST cannot effectively fulfill their legislated role primarily due to excessive instructional demands. Thus, students with exceptional needs, in many cases, are not receiving an education in the least restrictive environment because the RST role often is in conflict with local education agency policies.

Follow-up Study Findings: Currently 68% (26 of 38) of the former RST candidates are employed as RSTs. The majority of these RSTs are either district or county employees. This means that their supervision, and evaluation for retention and promotion, is conducted by someone outside the

school site where they work. Eighteen (82% of 22 RSTs responding) have completed all state requirements for the clear RST certificate.

In analyzing the functional role of RSTs in northeastern California, the most salient conclusion is that a large percentage of RSTs spend a majority of the school day on direct instruction of special education students. Nearly 70% of the twenty-two RSTs responding, coordinate the IEP process at their school. On the other hand, little time is set aside for the inservice training of regular classroom teachers, or for parent education workshops. Consultation is primarily an informal process, handled through brief discussions with teachers and administrators.

Beyond academic assessment, the RST has marginal responsibility for assessing children with exceptional needs. The school psychologist plays the key role in the administration of assessment tests. Overall, the RST's functional role, as currently implemented, involves direct instruction. The importance of the consultant teacher model is not reflected in the current use of the RST.

In summarizing the analysis of key policy issues, it is apparent that changes are needed in the delivery of the resource specialist program. To begin with, the removal of the caseload cap would further erode the RST's ability to deliver indirect services, such as consultation or parent education. Several of the RSTs reported having caseloads, that are de facto, larger than the state-mandated caseload cap of twenty-eight students. The RSTs' rankings of the state-mandated functions reinforce the fact that the majority of the RST's time is spent on direct instruction, and the least is spent on parent education workshops. Some parent contact, however, is maintained through conferences and the IEP process.

The analysis of the match between RST job descriptions and the state-mandated functions revealed several discrepancies. The most frequently reported by the RSTs is the lack of time to perform all the functions required, especially consultation on a regular basis. Some RSTs noted the absence of inservice training or parent education workshops in their job descriptions. Overall, a majority of RSTs feel their job descriptions only "somewhat match" the state-mandated functions.

In an effort to explore the potential impact of a mismatch between job description and RST function, RSTs were asked to comment on whether their students are receiving an education in the least restrictive environment. Only four RSTs said that their students are not receiving their education in the least restrictive environment, and their written responses blame the problem on the implementation of the least restrictive environment policy at their school. One problem noted is the use of the resource specialist program as a "pull-out" program for learning disabled, or children with emotional or severe behavior disorders. Apparently, some regular classroom teachers are not able, or willing, to integrate children with exceptional needs into the "mainstream." Seven RSTs said, that prior to the training program at CSU, Chico, their students were not receiving an education in the least restrictive environment. The response to this question by many was positive, because they felt personally responsible for the handicapped children's education in the least restrictive environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The most important question to be addressed is whether children served by these RSTs are receiving their education in the least restrictive environment. From the perspective of the fully qualified RST, the answer is yes: the resource specialist teacher is "qualified" by law to provide both direct and indirect services for handicapped children. Unfortunately, the least restrictive environment policy is controlled by the school or district.

The RST, in most cases, has no direct control over the continuum of services, and thus the least restrictive environment policy, being provided handicapped children.

The current approach to the least restrictive environment policy, in northeastern California, is simply not working. The school's organizational structure and policy implementation approaches must respond to the needs of handicapped children by using the consultation and coordination functions of the RST, and by deemphasizing direct instruction. The RST must be brought in as a partner, not as an additional teacher who handles all the "problem kids."

General Conclusions and Findings

Finding: RSTs spend the majority of their time on direct instruction, followed by assessment, then attendance at IEP meetings.

Conclusion: RSTs' job descriptions do not specify the amount of time to be spent on the various RST functions. The importance of the consultation and coordination roles is not emphasized in the RSTs' job descriptions. As found by Jenkins and Mayhall (1976), the most important element for successful integration of handicapped children into the "mainstream," within the school's organizational structure, is the relationship between the consultant teacher and the regular classroom teacher.

Finding: RSTs are primarily responsible for academic assessments of students, but school psychologists are responsible for the majority of other assessments.

Conclusion: The school psychologist's role in the implementation of the least restrictive environment policy has not been examined, but has serious implications in the process of "normalization." School psychologists manage a wider range of assessments, therefore, they may be more responsible for the "misidentification" of children as learning disabled than RSTs who are primarily responsible for academic assessment only. In many cases, the school psychologist coordinates the IEP team, and in some cases, unilaterally determines the LRE placement of handicapped students.

The school psychologist can wield more power over the least restrictive environment policy and the IEP process, because he: (1) is typically an older male; (2) is employed by the school district or county office of education, with the principal having no power of direct authority over him; (3) conducts aptitude tests which are more prestigious and have been used longer; (4) is perceived as providing technical assistance because he is not a teacher; and (5) has a degree in psychology that is more prestigious than a certificate.

Findings: Least Restrictive Environment Policy

Finding: The RST role is essential to the implementation of special education policy at the school site, and least restrictive environment (LRE) policy in particular.

Conclusion: Instructional responsibility of the RST needs to be deemphasized by local education agencies, so that more time can be spent on the consultant role to facilitate effective normalization. The least restrictive environment (LRE) policy should be implemented based on recommendations from the RST. As the highest level special educator, the RST should coordinate the IEP process. To determine LRE placements, support of the interdisciplinary IEP team is essential.

Finding: In order to facilitate normalization, and to ensure an appropriate education for handicapped children, regular classroom teachers continue to need education regarding handicapped children.

Conclusion: Some regular classroom teachers need to receive training to increase their knowledge, and to change their attitudes and behavior toward handicapped children. Until regular classroom teachers are better able to

identify students who actually need resource specialist assistance, and to collaborate with the RST in their education, the need for inservice training will remain. More time for consultation will also provide the opportunity for educating regular classroom teachers.

Finding: The least restrictive environment (LRE) policy is not being uniformly implemented at the local education agency (LEA) level. In some cases, according to some RSTs, it is not being implemented according to the state and federal statutes governing education of the handicapped.

Conclusion: The RST, in some cases, is not being used any differently than were special education teachers prior to P.L. 94-142 and the California Master Plan for Special Education. The resource specialist program (RSP) is being used as a "pull-out" program by some regular classroom teachers who wish to remove "problem kids" from the mainstream. Local implementation of LRE policy requires closer examination by the State Department of Education's Special Education Division. Some LEAs' reports to the state may be "masking" reality in the field.

Finding: The consultation role of the RST is limited by the time required for direct instruction. Fourteen (67% of 21) RSTs reported that they spend from five to six hours daily on direct instruction.

Conclusion: Consultation has not been emphasized by local education agencies. Instructional responsibility of the RST needs to be de-emphasized by LEAs, so that more time can be spent on the consultant role to facilitate effective mainstreaming.

Finding: The student caseload size does have an impact on RSTs, especially those with large caseloads.

Conclusion: The removal of the caseload cap for RSTs would create a negative impact on the RSTs' workloads and their clients: students, parents, and regular classroom teachers. Currently, contact with parents is limited; inservice opportunities are virtually non-existent; and the consultation function has been relegated to "hallway" and lunch break conversations. If the caseload cap is removed, RSTs will have less time for these duties, because their caseload size and instructional time will increase.

The RST training program created a cadre of "qualified" resource specialist teachers. Unfortunately, this training did not include a component to change the knowledge and attitudes of other teachers and administrators, who play an integral role in the implementation of the least restrictive environment policy. Hopefully, these RSTs will be able to make an impact through inservice training for their colleagues. However, given the minimal number of workshops currently provided by RSTs during the school year, it is not anticipated that any major impact can be expected in the short term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations for future research are indicated.

Research Recommendations

Several questions remain unanswered based on this research. It is recommended that future studies be undertaken to answer the following questions:

Evaluation of RSTs: How are RSTs evaluated? By whom? What criteria are used?

Analysis of the personnel evaluation system, used by the LEAs, may shed some light on the role of the RST within the school's organizational structure. If the RST is evaluated by a supervisor, other than the building supervisor, usually a principal, then the RST may be perceived as an "outsider." In this case, the assumption would be made that a bifurcation of

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the regular and special education units still exist. Therefore, normalization has not yet been achieved (Mitchell 1976).

Determination of caseload size: What measures should be used to establish an appropriate caseload size?

Caseload size has been identified as a problem in this study and others (Ballard-Campbell and Semmel 1982; Jenkins and Mayhall 1979; Haight 1984), because there has been a lack of consideration of the multiple responsibilities of the RST in determination of the caseload size. The next step is to identify what is a reasonable caseload size. Variables for determination of appropriate size need to be developed and evaluated, perhaps through a pilot study. Factors affecting caseload size may vary between urban and rural areas. Criteria, such as school size, number of children identified as learning disabled, number of instructional aides available for the resource specialist program, and other factors, need to be examined as possible variables for determining the caseload size.

Impact of RST role on handicapped children: What evidence can be gathered to evaluate the RSTs' direct and indirect impact on services for handicapped children?

Moya and Gay (1982) call for more evaluation studies regarding special educators. The Miller and Sabatino (1978) study could be updated to focus on the consultant role of the resource specialist teacher, and the impact it has on mainstreaming. The study could also analyze the differences between elementary and secondary resource specialist teachers, as recommended by Ballard-Campbell and Semmel (1982).

RST functional role: Should the functional role of the RST be redefined to de-emphasize instruction, in favor of consultation and coordination?

Haight (1984) points out the problem of insufficient role definition, for the consultant teacher, especially as it relates to services to be delivered. She notes that this problem is exacerbated by the lack of time to perform duties, and an organizational structure that may burden rather than facilitate the consultant role. Ballard-Campbell and Semmel (1982) also identified the need for a prioritization of the RST's responsibilities, and the need to determine the appropriate combination of instruction and other responsibilities.

Policy Recommendations

The follow-up study identified a major weakness in the implementation of the least restrictive environment (LRE) policy. The local education agencies (LEAs) have control over a policy that they are not effectively trained to manage. Authority for LRE policy is in the hands of principals, or district level administrators, who make decisions based on the "needs of the many." The LRE policy, however, was developed to meet the "needs of the few." Directors of Special Education are removed from the daily activities at the school site, and therefore are less able to make informed decisions regarding least restrictive environment policy. The school psychologist, in some cases, has control over the IEP process, and thus, to some degree, the LRE placement policy. In summary, the following recommendations are made:

- The RST role should be redefined in California's Education Code to focus on consultation more than instruction.
- Increased inservice of regular classroom teachers regarding handicapped students should be required of LEAs receiving P.L. 94-142 funds.
- "Qualified" RSTs should be the IEP team coordinator at all schools in order to create a uniform implementation of the LRE placement policy.

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